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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000202

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SUBJECT: AMB AND TALABANI DISCUSS IRAN, DE-BA,ATHIFICATION,
AND GOVERNMENT FORMATION

REF: BAGHDAD 00195

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: In a January 17 meeting, Ambassador told President Jalal Talabani that the U.S. would never relent on the war against terror, refuting SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim's public statements accusing the USG of encouraging terrorism with its Sunni Arab outreach program. Ambassador told Talabani that the U.S. is strongly urging Sunni Arab political leaders to renounce violence definitively. Talabani said he understands and supports U.S. efforts. Talabani agreed with Ambassador that Hakim's public statements are causing anger among Sunni Arabs who want to join the political process. Talabani said he thinks that Deputy President Abd al-Mahdi understands how Hakim's statements are stoking the opposition, and that Abd al-Mahdi is trying to work with others in the Iraqi leadership to restrain Hakim's statements. Ambassador and Talabani discussed the implications of a proposed statement by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party renouncing Saddam Hussein and Saddamism. Talabani said he thinks the proposed statement indicates the Ba'ath Party might be moving towards accepting the political process. Talabani also told Ambassador that the Iranian government has approached him seeking support in the dispute over the Iranian nuclear program. Talabani said that Iraq could do no more than support countries' rights to develop peaceful nuclear energy programs within the applicable UN frameworks. Talabani said he believes that Iranian President Ahmedinajad is coming under criticism at home. END SUMMARY.

NO U.S. RETREAT ON WAR ON TERROR

12. (C) In January 17 meeting with President Jalal Talabani, Ambassador raised POTUS's concern regarding public statements SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim made accusing the USG of encouraging terrorism by preventing the Iraqi Ministry of Interior from carrying out its duties. Ambassador emphatically stated that the U.S. would never relent on the war on terrorism. Although there is no possibility the U.S. could support the inclusion of Saddamists in the new GOI, Ambassador continued, it is critical to engage and support legitimate Sunni Arab leaders in the political process.

AMBASSADOR AND TALABANI DISCUSS HAKIM

13. (C) Talabani reported that Hakim had asked whether the U.S. had changed its policy toward the Shias. According to Talabani, Hakim had approached him January 16 upset because Hakim had heard rumors that Ambassador is supporting Fadilah Party's Nadim al-Jabiri for Prime Minister. Talabani said he reassured Hakim that this is not the case and urged

Ambassador to hold regular meetings with Hakim.

¶4. (C) Ambassador said that Hakim has been getting a great deal of negative reviews in the Western media, including a recent New York Times editorial. Ambassador said he had expected a contentious meeting with Hakim January 17, but instead found him very subdued. Ambassador told Talabani that he urged Hakim to temper the tone of his comments, reminding Hakim that the Shia Coalition does not have the votes necessary for a two-thirds majority of the Council of Representatives and so should not be burning any bridges. However, Ambassador noted, as the party with the most seats overall, the Shia Coalition needs to be more generous in welcoming the Sunni Arabs into the political process.

¶5. (C) Ambassador noted that he has been very tough on the Sunni Arabs lately, telling them that (a) once the final results of the elections are announced, the Sunni Arab leaders must support the final numbers or risk losing U.S. support; and (b) once the Council of Representatives and the new GOI are established, acts of violence must stop or they will be considered terrorist attacks against a legitimate government.

A NEW BA'ATH PARTY?

¶6. (C) Talabani then brought up a recent internal draft statement by the Iraqi Ba'ath Party that reportedly renounces Saddam Hussein and Saddamism (e.g., the attacks against the Iraqi people and the invasion of Kuwait). After handing Ambassador a copy of the document, Talabani stated that he is waiting to express his opinion until after the USG comes out

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with its position on the statement. Talabani, however, said he believes the document represents a genuine first step. Talabani stated that if the statement is bona fide, a new, more acceptable Ba'ath Party could emerge, which the GOI should encourage.

¶7. (C) Ambassador asked if something concrete could be offered on changing the de-Ba'athification law if the Ba'athists renounce Saddamism and violence. Talabani replied that the de-Ba'athification law has caused problems for everyone by not distinguishing between the regular party members and the Saddamist leadership who committed crimes against the Iraqi people. Changing the de-Ba'athification law, Talabani said, would be one way to help defeat the hardcore Saddamists from inside the Ba'ath Party. Talabani stated that he, Abd al-Mahdi, and Planning Minister Barham Saleh are in discussions with Hakim to help him understand the situation.

IRAN WANTS RELATIONS WITH U.S.

¶8. (S) Talabani said that during a recent meeting with former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Rafsanjani indicated again that Tehran is open to establishing a friendly relationship with the USG. Talabani added that he met with Iranian Charge Qomi on January 16. Qomi raised the issue of the Iranian nuclear program, Talabani noted, requesting Iraqi public support against international pressure. Talabani said he told Qomi that Iraq could support the development of nuclear energy for peaceful uses only. If Tehran was feeling pressured, Talabani reportedly told Qomi, Tehran has only itself to blame. Iraq would not counter the UN on this issue, Talabani said. Talabani stated that he heard that President Ahmedinejad is being attacked internally for his international blunders by Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Khatami, who also have openly criticized Ahmedinejad.

GOVERNMENT FORMATION - HOW TO PROCEED?

¶9. (C) Ambassador asked Talabani about the progress of government formation talks. Talabani responded that they are now at the stage of leadership-level discussions, and that former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi agreed to accompany Talabani on his trip to Erbil on January 21 to meet with the Ambassador, Talabani, and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masud Barzani on forming a unity government (see reftel). Ambassador mentioned that in a prior meeting Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari had discussed the idea of a two-pronged approach to government formation -- leadership and sub-leadership groups to discuss candidates. Zebari said Ambassador could discuss this idea with Barzani in Erbil. Ambassador asked whether this was Zebari's idea or someone else's. Talabani stated that he did not understand the need for a dual approach.

KHALILZAD